President Obama's Visit – final draft

Ehud Barak 789 words

President Obama's visit to Israel comes at a crucial time. Israel and the Middle East are at a decisive juncture. Generations old regional order is collapsing towards transformative regimes or even worse, failing ones.

An unprecedented geopolitical earthquake has shattered the regional order, in the last few years.

Two lessons and an insight could be drawn by Israelis

(i) Be modest with predictions. Especially about the future. Think of Egypt. Who predicted the revolution? Who could have predicted it?

(ii) Do not rely on "the World" to act when worse come to worst – look at Syria. Assad's jet fighters, tanks and artillery are slaughtering his own citizens for two years now. Over 70'000 Syrians killed. Yet there is neither unity of purpose nor political will to act.

And an insight: many friends and allies of Israel tell us that the root cause for all the problems in the Middle East is our inability to solve the conflict with the Palestinians. Clearly this is not true. Recent developments in the Middle East have been far beyond our control, and completely independent of our deeds. Even if a peace agreement with the Palestinians had been signed and sealed a long time ago, the Muslim Brotherhood would still have come to power in Egypt, Syria

would still be mired in a bloody civil war and Iran would still be pursuing nuclear capabilities and hegemonic role in the Gulf.

The neighborhood is tough and tough decisions -- which require courage, conviction and mutual trust -- are urgently needed.

The major challenges are failing states armed with tens of thousands of rockets and missiles, global terror led by Al Qaeda and the Jihadists and ,of course, Iran

Facing this demanding array of threats, what is to be done?

I see an opportunity within the difficulties which we face. The opportunity is to join hands, the US, moderate Arab regimes and Israel and try to tackle all three of the challenges.

We should firstly start building a Regional Security Framework. The RSF will be focused on a joint effort to fight terror, protect border security and provide missile defense. If led by the US it could provide a host of synergies for all its participants.

Secondly, we need a daring peace initiative vis-à-vis the Palestinians. A two-state solution is the only viable solution. Its absence is not the fountainhead of all regional troubles but its presence is a compelling imperative for Israel in order to secure our future as a Jewish and democratic state. If fully fledged agreement would not be feasible, which is probably the case, interim agreements (security and borders first, for example) should be tried. And if even interim agreement will end up being unobtainable then unilateral steps, should be considered in order to place a wedge on the dangerous slippery slope

towards a bi national state. It is not just a good idea, long due, per se, it might help the abovementioned joining of hands

And of course, there is Iran. It is Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities which is the paramount challenge facing Israel, the region and the world today. A nuclear hegemonic Iran spells the end of any conceivable non-proliferation regime. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and later Egypt will follow suit. In the future, even terrorist groups may try. Iran will intimidate its neighbors in the Gulf, Terror sponsored groups and rogue proxies will be emboldened and terror disruptive and murderous activities will more intensively spread all over the region.

A nuclear Iran is an imminent and acute danger to the world and the region. Dealing with it won't be simple now. But dealing with a nuclear Iran few years down the road will be much more complicated, much more costly in terms of both financial resources and human lives and could produce even more dangerous unintended consequences.

Diplomacy is still trying to solve it and sanctions are unprecedented and hurting. But being a long time observer of Iranian maneuvering I do not believe it will lead to a moment of truth where the Ayatullahs will decide to give up.

Thus all options, including the military one, must remain on the table. When we say it we mean it. We expect all those who say it to mean it as well.

The strategic triangle made of the "Regional Security Framework"; a reinvigorated Peace Process with the Palestinians; and an effective halt of the Iranian nuclear program ; buttressed by a solid Israel-US relationship, is the most effective approach to deal with the dynamic challenges on our horizon. Only the US can put the whole triangle on the table and lead it. Regional leaders readiness to take decisions will be needed. But as our old sages said: "If not now… When?".